

The Linguistic Development of the Fourth and Sixth Graders: The Types and Subtypes of Their Syntactic Constructions

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Abstract: This research aims at investigating how the elementary-school students write in English since they are already taught how to write the spellings of the English words and how to speak the language. The objectives of this research were to identify what syntactic types and subtypes are likely formed by the fourth and sixth graders of elementary school when they produce a situational description disregarding the errors that the learners have made. Such errors are considered to be developmental since they are inevitable in the process of learning and they are, therefore, not the concern of this paper. This study was done to the fourth-grade students and sixth-grade students of elementary school. All the samples were given a situational picture of a living room where a father, mother, son and daughter got together, and were asked to describe the picture according to their own perception. They were given only 45 minutes to do the assessment as it was the allocated time available. All the sentential constructions produced by the students were counted and analyzed in order to find the types and subtypes of sentences the fourth graders and the sixth graders used in their situational descriptive writing. The results of the study show that it the constructions of the sixth graders' compound sentences are mostly simple in the sense that they conjoin only two simple sentences. Similarly, the constructions of their complex sentences are not very complex too. They consist of only one independent clause and one dependent clause. In their syntactic constructions compound and complex sentences are not found.

Keywords: linguistic development, syntactic Constructions

INTRODUCTION

When a learner acquires a language, s/he learns the rules of social behavior of the people who speak the language and s/he realizes the rules by the grammatical rules (Mayor, 2016). This means that when a child is born and brought up in a culture where the language is spoken, s/he, from the very beginning of his/her life, has been trying to communicate through the frequent delivery of utterances of the language. S/He communicates in a spoken and written way. That is why, a child takes years to know the language well enough to use. The child undergoes stages of discovering the patterns of the

language in order that s/he is accepted in the society where the language is used. These stages are affected by the cognitive development of the child (Lightbown and Spada, 2000).

This is also true with the language learning situation here in Indonesia. Most Indonesian learners are brought up in their first language other than English. No wonder when they first learn the English language which is a foreign one, they undergo a kind of trial-and-error process in this early stage. They may go back to the stage where they first learn their mother tongue. Abe (2016) states that when children learn a language as a second or foreign language they must be given opportunities to learn to use the language. They must be given a chance to experience to be able to communicate with other people.

In Indonesia English starts to be formally taught in the elementary school; however, it is already introduced in many playgroups. In elementary schools they are not only taught how to speak the language but they are also encouraged to write the language.

It is quite interesting to investigate how the elementary-school students write in English since they are already taught how to write the spellings of the English words and how to speak the language. Are they able to write a short essay by utilizing all the English knowledge that they have learned? If they can manage to write in English, how they syntactically form their ideas?

This paper is trying to spot what syntactic types and subtypes are likely formed by the fourth and sixth graders of elementary school when they produce a situational description disregarding the errors that the learners have made. Such errors are considered to be developmental since they are inevitable in the process of learning and they are, therefore, not the concern of this paper. Teachers of English who deal with children are expected to be able to look into this developmental learning process as to encourage them to learn the English language rather than to discourage them to communicate in the language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's Acquiring a Language and Their Linguistic Development

Lightbown and Spada (2000) state that "children from immigrant families eventually speak the language of their new community with native-like fluency, but their parents rarely achieve such high levels of mastery of the spoken language". This shows that children can easily adapt to the new language used in the new community where they are living now. That children can learn the new language more easily compared to adults is that children have a critical period which helps contribute to the second language learning in early childhood. During this period children try out the constructions of the rules of the language when they communicate. Hudelson (2015) states that children as learners of the language should be given opportunities to experience with the language in a classroom context.

According to Slobin as quoted in Ferguson and Slobin (2013) a child will be able to produce the language when s/he is exposed to kinds of events encoded in the language being learned. S/he must be able to process, organize and store linguistic information, and his/her linguistic performance develops along with the meanings and the forms of sentences or utterances.

Taylor and Taylor (2012) state that “a sentence expresses its semantic content using a syntactic structure and a sound pattern as vehicles”. When a sentence or an utterance is expressed, it must be contextually understood. The produced sentence or utterance can be unlikely to be true as in *The boy moved the tower*, syntactically complex as in *The car that his father bought him last Thursday when it was his birthday is a cadillac*, or semantically abstract and complex as in *Energy equals mass times the speed of light square* (Taylor and Taylor, 2012).

Each word in a sentence does not convey meaning only but it also has a grammatical function as either a noun, a pronoun, an adjective, a verb, an adverb, a preposition, an article, or a conjunction. Besides, a word may inflect in its ending when it is in a plural form, in a participial form, and in a preterite form.

Quoting the study done by Roger Brown, Courtney Cazden and Ursulla Bellugi concerning the child's grammar from I to III, Slobin presents that children who are native speakers mainly produce simple sentences when they are at the age of one to three years old. They do not conjoin simple sentences, nor do they construct embedded sentences. He further says “that the children's knowledge of the simple sentence is complete before they start to embed and conjoin is not clearly true”. It means that children still learn about simple sentences even though they begin to be able to use more complex constructions. It is obvious that children do not need to wait for the completeness of their knowledge of simple sentences to learn other complex constructions. In the study Slobin found that declarative-affirmative sentences, negatives, imperatives and interrogatives were the constructions produced by the children of one year old to three years old.

The study reveals that at the age of one year a child used “no” added initially to several kinds of utterance such as *No fall*, *No put*, *No picture in there*. At two or three years old, the “no” forms are supplemented by ‘*can't*’, ‘*won't*’, and ‘*don't*’. Both one year old up to three year old the progressive inflection (-ing) emerged such as ‘*I'm knowing the song*’, ‘*I liking candy*’, or ‘*I wanting a book*’. At one year old plural number in English is absolutely absent but it is often present in three years old. (Slobin, 2013)

Lightbown and Spada (2000) state that the grammatical morphemes produced by children are present progressive (-ing), plural -s, irregular past forms, possessive 's, copula, articles 'the' and 'a', regular past (-ed), third-person singular simple present -s and auxiliary 'be'. A child who masters the grammatical morphemes in the last order ,i.e. auxiliary *be*, has certainly mastered the grammatical morphemes that precede in the order.

It can be concluded that children master those morphemic constructions in order. There is such a developmental order in the part of the children in acquiring the English language.

Lightbown and Spada observe learners of English as a second language who had different first language backgrounds on their production of grammatical morphemes. The children can use plural forms better than possessive forms, the -ing inflections than the -ed inflections. This study reveals one thing that the production of those grammatical morphemes is not the result of the influence of their first language even though studies suggest that the learners' first language has a more important influence on acquisition sequences. Lightbown and Spada give examples that learners whose first language has a possessive -s form which resembles the English's (such as German) seem to acquire this form earlier than those whose first language has a very different way of forming the possessive (such as French and Spanish).

Miller as quoted in Ferguson and Slobin (2013) states that relative clauses become confusing constructions to children as the use of the relative pronouns overlaps with the use of question words. This happened as the children acquire the relative clauses at about the same time when they acquire the question-word questions. In word class order, the children first masters nouns and noun phrases, verbs, adjectives, then other things such as prepositional phrases and adverbs.

From the results of the studies above it is known that children, in the process of learning the language, demonstrate linguistic development in their early years. And the stages in language acquisition are related to children's cognitive development, for example, children do not use temporal adverbs such as 'tomorrow' or 'last week' correctly until they develop an adequate understanding of time (Lightbown and Spada, 2000). Mayor (2016) states that children at their early age are able to demonstrate a rapid development of the sound system of the language they are learning as a second language but they exhibit their grammatical competence quite slow throughout their life. It is no wonder that they sometimes or often mix up with the features of their first language when they are in the process of acquiring the second language.

METHOD

This study was done to the fourth-grade students and sixth-grade students of elementary school and there were seventy-two fourth graders (excluding fifteen students submitting empty papers) and eighty-two sixth graders (excluding seven students writing nothing) who were taken from four classes: two fourth-grade classes and two sixth-grade classes.

The fourth graders were chosen as samples because they were considered to have had enough English since they studied English from the first grade and they were ready to write a simple short essay. While the sixth graders were chosen as they were assumed to

have developed their English more than the fourth graders even though it was not perfect yet.

All the samples were given a situational picture of a living room where a father, mother, son and daughter got together, and were asked to describe the picture according to their own perception. They were given only 45 minutes to do the assessment as it was the allocated time available.

All the sentential constructions produced by the students were counted and analyzed in order to find the types and subtypes of sentences the fourth graders and the sixth graders used in their situational descriptive writing.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The following table shows the number of the types and subtypes of syntactic constructions produced by the fourth graders and sixth graders when they wrote a situational descriptive writing:

No.	Types & subtypes of constructions	Number of constructions made	
		4 th graders	6 th graders
1	Simple Sentence		
	- Compound subject	23	43
	- Compound Verb	2	9
	- Compound object	6	9
	- PP in subject constructions	4	6
	- Inverted Constructions	10	5
	- 1 Subject 1 verb and/or 1 object construction	276	361
2	Compound Sentence	2	18
3	Complex Sentence	4	15
	TOTAL	327	466

From the finding both the fourth graders and the sixth graders produced a lot more simple sentences in comparison to the compound sentences and complex sentences. The fourth graders produced 319 simple sentences compared to two compound sentences and four complex sentences they produced while the sixth graders produced 433 simple sentences compared to eighteen compound sentences and fifteen complex sentences.

Out of 319 simple sentences the fourth graders used 276 simple constructions that consisted of one subject one verb and one object, followed by twenty-three simple sentences which had a compound subject construction, ten simple sentences which had

inverted constructions, six simple sentences with compound objects, four simple sentences with prepositional phrase (PP) constructions in the subject position, and two simple sentences with compound verb construction.

Out of 433 simple sentences the sixth graders used 361 simple constructions that consisted of one subject one verb and one object, followed by forty-three simple sentences with a compound subject construction, eighteen simple sentences where nine of them had a compound verb construction and the other nine a compound object construction, six simple sentences with prepositional phrase construction in the subject position, and five simple sentences which had inverted constructions.

The finding reveals that the fourth graders are able to produce simple sentences with simple constructions while they are still infant in producing compound constructions which conjoined the objects. For examples:

- *Father is sleeping*
- *Mother is watching TV*
- *I am love mother, father brother.*

What is interesting about the finding is that the fourth graders rudimentarily produced compound and complex sentences without any conjunctions and subordinators as in the following examples:

- *Father sleep, mother wofe, I am watch, Tono watch.*
- *Boy is sitting he wants watch TV.*

It can be understood that that particular student wanted to write that *Father is sleeping, mother is weaving, Tono is watching TV and I am also watching TV*. While the next example should be written as *The boy is sitting because he wants to watch TV*.

This is contrary to the production of sentences by the sixth graders. They could produce more compound and complex sentences, and they could conjoin the simple sentences with the conjunctions *but* and *and* as in the following examples:

- *My sister is 1 SMP but me is 6 SD.*
- *My name is Jacky and my sister name is Celine.*

The sixth graders were also able to use a subordinator to produce such complex sentences as in the following examples:

- *The lamp is on because the in the living room is dark.*
- *Before go to school I breakfast.*
- *After he goes to his home, he always take a nap at his favorite sofa.*

In the production of simple sentences, the sixth graders are able to conjoin the subjects and objects as shown in the examples below:

- *One day me and my family sleep and happy.*
- *They are eat fish, broccoli and fish.*
- *They were have diligent son and daughter.*

From the table above it is also seen that both the fourth graders and the sixth graders seem to be able to use the prepositional phrase constructions in a subject position and inverted constructions even though the number in the table shows that the sixth graders produce fewer constructions than the fourth graders do. It does not mean that the sixth graders become unable to produce such constructions but they are likely not to use those constructions. For examples:

- *Beside me is my father*
- *On the table is a lamp*
- *Beside my mother is lamp and flowers.*

3 Conclusion

The types of sentences that the fourth and sixth graders are able to construct are the simple sentences, the compound sentences and the complex sentences as shown above. In the constructions of their simple sentences, it seems that they (both the fourth and sixth graders) do not exhibit as many compound verbs and objects as compound subjects. However, the sixth graders more frequently use compound sentences and complex sentences with the correct coordinating conjunctions and subordinators while the fourth graders do not use any conjunctions nor subordinators. It is true that the constructions of the sixth graders' compound sentences are mostly simple in the sense that they conjoin only two simple sentences. Similarly, the constructions of their complex sentences are not very complex too. They consist of only one independent clause and one dependent clause. In their syntactic constructions compound and complex sentences are not found.

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